

The Question of Quality: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Distance Education

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Determining the effectiveness of distance-delivered courses and programs is important not only from an instructor's perspective, but a necessary function for many stakeholders involved in the support of distance education (DE) efforts. This session will address the various aspects of DE that should be assessed in order to ensure a comprehensive evaluation strategy for distributed learning experiences.

Problem Statement

The outcomes of distance education initiatives can provide valuable insights to program effectiveness, as well as justification for program continuance. Unfortunately, the questions that are often asked about DE are either too few or inaccurately focused. For example, one of the common inquiries about distance learning is how it compares to face-to-face instruction. Although prevalent, this question is a poor one, as it is based on the premise that the delivery medium is the only factor that affects learning. The field of instructional technology discourages the use of such "media comparison studies" and offers a variety of solutions for determining the instructional efficacy of DE events.

Besides the effectiveness of the instruction, many other factors contribute to the success (or failure) of distributed learning initiatives. Student support services, technology functionality and accessibility, and participant completion rates are all indicators of the quality of a distance course or program. Cost effectiveness is yet another factor that draws great attention in terms of program justification and continuance. Some institutions expend tremendous monetary resources to create technological infrastructure and student support systems, and as such, must determine if the resources invested produced the desired outcomes. As anyone involved in the implementation of DE is well aware, the complexity of DE systems can make the assessment of such efforts quite challenging.

Description of solution

All of the aforementioned issues can be addressed by a comprehensive evaluation program. Such an assessment will require the involvement of various stakeholders in the DE delivery process. This presentation will offer strategies to create a thorough and informative approach to answering the question of quality for distributed learning experiences. Recommendations will be made regarding effective questions and techniques for distance education initiatives so that attendees can implement such solutions at their own institution.

Outcome

This presentation will be conducted by a group of faculty who have both subject knowledge of evaluation design, as well as three years of experience in the delivery of an on-line Master's program in Instructional Technology. The presenters will draw from their experiences in determining their own program's effectiveness and translate that to a set of generalized evaluation practices. Having to analyze the program that they offer has been informative in terms of defining what is meant by program "success" and what factors affect successful outcomes.

Relevance to other institutions

This session will be of interest to many conference attendees, who are likely stakeholders in the success of distance education programs at their own institution. Being able to demonstrate that the heavy resource requirements of distributed learning environments produce effective returns and meet the goals of the institution will likely attract a variety of participants across the spectrum of SITE attendees.